



Disability at University: guidance and a glossary of terms

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The National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP)

NADP is the professional association for members of staff working with disabled students at colleges and universities. Our 1500 members include academic staff working inclusively with students and those in individual support either within the institution or externally. Membership includes staff from nearly all universities and many colleges in the United Kingdom, as well as several from Europe and across the world.



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Introduction

We know that starting university is a big step, one that often begins a long time before you finally arrive on campus. For many students who have received support or adjustments at school or college the transition to university can be confusing and hard to navigate, not least because the language and terminology used about Special Educational Needs (SEN), disability and support is very different. This can prevent some students from accessing the support they need.

Who is this guide for?

This guide has been created to support the understanding of the following people:

- Students at secondary school or college who are thinking of, or in the process of applying to university.
- Students who have been identified as having 'Special Educational Needs' or 'Additional Needs', or who think they may need support at university for a disability, learning difference, long term medical condition or mental health condition.
- Teachers and SENCo staff in schools and colleges.
- Parents, carers, guardians, or other supporters.

What is this guide about?

The aim of this guide is to help explain the differences in language and terminology so that you can understand what you need to do to access the support and adjustments you need at university. This list is not exhaustive, and language and terminology can vary between different universities, but this guide should give you a basic understanding of the key terms.

Setting up support at university can take time. You may need to register for support and work through funding processes which can take many weeks to complete. Taking time to understand the terminology will help you understand what steps you need to take to access support. Further information about the process for accessing support, and how this differs to school or college processes, is detailed in this document.

It is important to remember that none of the information about your support or adjustments at school will automatically transfer to university. Your university won't know about your support requirements or exam arrangements unless you tell them. You should contact Disability Services at your chosen university or universities as soon as you can, preferably before you finish school or college.

Accessing support in school versus university: important differences

The process for accessing support at university is very different to the process of accessing support at school or college. As an adult, you will now be responsible for completing the process, which means you will need to fill in forms and contact universities and suppliers to set support up. The key differences are outlined below:

Accessing support in school

At school, you don't always need a diagnosis to access support. Instead, your parents may have talked with the SENCo for your school about any challenges you are experiencing, or these may have been identified by your teachers. You may have been added to the SEN register and been supported by the SEN department. You may have been told that you don't have 'special educational needs' (SEN) but that you do have 'additional needs' and require support.

Your SENCo may have arranged support for you, which might have included:

- Working with a teaching assistant
- Working in a smaller group
- Access to a quiet room
- Support with getting around school
- Exam arrangements such as extra time

You may have had an Education, Social & Health Plan (EHCP) in place at school. This report will have been put together by your school, your local authority, and other specialists. It will have detailed the additional support and adjustments you required at school, and it will have been used to gain additional funding to pay for this support. Any funding will have been used by your school to pay for your support, or for resources or other adjustments.

You may have had a Form 8 assessment for exam arrangements (such as extra time) if you have difficulties with processing text, handwriting or reading speed

that your school or college thinks might be related to a specific learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia; dyspraxia).

As you were under 18 years old at school it is likely that your parents, carer, or guardian will have been involved in many of the discussions about your support. You may not have been involved, and you probably didn't need to complete any forms to access your support. The costs of any support will have been met by your school or local authority.

Summary:

- A diagnosis is not always required at school
- Support is usually coordinated by the SENCo
- Parents, carers or guardians will have been involved in discussions rather than the student
- Exam arrangements may have been arranged through a Form 8 assessment

Accessing support in university

At university you usually need to have official evidence of a diagnosed disability to access support or adjustments. As you are an adult, you will be responsible for making sure that you have access to the support that you need during your studies. You will need to provide a copy of your diagnostic report, or a letter from a medical professional. If you don't currently have a formal diagnosis, you may need to arrange (and pay for) additional evidence, such as an Educational Psychologist assessment for dyslexia.

At most universities, you will need to register with Disability Services (see the 'Common Terms' section for other examples of service titles). You will usually need to give some information about your requirements, as well as providing official evidence of your disability.

Once you have registered with them, Disability Services will work with you to identify the support and adjustments you need during your studies. Some of the adjustments may be similar to those you had at school (e.g. exam arrangements), but some will be different. There are generally two categories of support and adjustments which can be implemented, as follows:

- 1. University reasonable adjustments:** all universities are required to follow basic inclusive practice approaches and to put in place various elements of support. This may include exam arrangements, note taking,

orientation and personal assistant support, and accessible resources. The cost of these adjustments will be met by the university.

- 2. Funded support:** there are some elements of support which require funding. These include specialist one-to-one support, British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation, specialist equipment, software and training or other disability-related travel costs. Most disabled students are eligible for funding to cover the costs of this support. This funding is called 'Disabled Students' Allowances' (DSAs) and it is available from the main Student Funding Bodies, such as Student Finance England, Student Finance Wales or the Student Awards Agency Scotland. Disability Services will be able to advise you on your eligibility and assist you in applying for DSAs. If you are not eligible for DSAs, you should talk with Disability Services about alternative funding options. There is further information about DSAs in the next section.

Social and personal care support

Universities are not able to provide social or personal care support. If you have received this support during your time at school or college, it is important that you talk with your Local Authority and/or adult social services department to investigate how this support will be transferred to assist you at university.

Involving parents, carers, guardians or other supporters

You will be an adult when you start university, and because of data protection regulations (UK-GDPR), universities cannot legally discuss you or aspects of your support with family members or supporters. Your family members or supporters cannot arrange your support for you, although they may be able to help you to complete forms and access the process. It is possible for you to give written consent for family members or supporters to attend meetings with you.

Remember: none of the information about your support or adjustments at school will automatically transfer to university. Your university won't know about your support requirements or exam arrangements unless you tell them. You should contact Disability Services at your chosen university/universities as soon as you can, and before you finish school or college.

Remember too that the school environment is very different to the university environment. Universities are much bigger than schools and may be split

across multiple sites. The way in which you learn may be different too, with a much greater focus on independent learning skills. You will frequently work with unfamiliar staff and other students. You should think about these differences when considering the support you need at university as it may be different to school.

Summary:

- Diagnostic evidence is usually required at university
- Support is coordinated by Disability Services (or similar)
- As an adult, the student must apply for funding and organise support with the help of Disability Services, if required.
- Support at university will look different to support at school

Disabled Students' Allowances

What are Disabled Students' Allowances?

Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) form a grant which is provided by the government to pay for any additional study-related costs you may have as a direct result of your disability. It is not a loan: nothing has to be paid back or given back at the end of your course. The funding and support you receive depends on what you need; it is not means-tested or related to you or your family's income.

DSA pays for four main categories of equipment and support, depending on individual requirements, as follows:

- **Specialist equipment and software** such as speech to text software, mind-mapping software, a digital voice recorder or ergonomic equipment. If you do not own one already, you may be recommended a laptop, but you will need to pay the first £200 towards this. If you are recommended any software, you will also have access to installation support and training.
- **One-to-one support from a specialist support worker**, such as a Study Skills Tutor (dyslexia tutor, for example), Specialist Mentor or BSL interpreter.
- **A travel allowance** to help with any extra travel costs you may have to attend your university, college, or placement because of your disability. The amount you get will depend on your requirements.

- **Support with additional study-related costs** such as photocopying or printing materials.

You may not receive all of these elements of DSA. You will take part in a Study Needs Assessment to help you work out the most suitable support.

Who is eligible for DSA?

Most UK undergraduate and taught postgraduate students who have evidence of a disability are eligible for DSA, provided they are studying an approved course for a least one year.

How do I apply for DSA?

The process of applying for DSA varies depending on where in the UK you live. Each of the home nations has its own application process and its own set of forms, although they are broadly similar. You can use the following links to find the details for the area where you live:

Area	Funding Body	Link
England	Student Finance England	https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa
Scotland	Student Awards Agency Scotland	https://www.saas.gov.uk/forms/dsa
Wales	Student Finance Wales	https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/
Northern Ireland	Student Finance Northern Ireland	https://www.studentfinancenir.co.uk/

NHS students

If you're applying for a course which is eligible for NHS funding (e.g. medicine or dentistry), you should apply for DSA through your Bursary Online Support System (BOSS) account. If you don't have a BOSS account, you must open one before you can apply for DSA to prove that you're eligible for NHS funding. For further information please visit the NHS website at <https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/nhs-bursary-students>.

What does the process of applying for DSA involve?

Although the different funding bodies operate slightly differently, the process will usually include the following:

1. You will complete an application form and supply evidence.

2. Your eligibility will be assessed and confirmed.
3. You will undertake a Study Needs Assessment which will make recommendations for equipment, support and adjustments.
4. The recommendations will be checked by your Funding Body.
5. You will be given final approval.
6. You will contact equipment and support providers to set everything up.

What is a Study Needs Assessment?

A Study Needs Assessment is part of the application for DSA. It is an informal discussion with a qualified Needs Assessor who will ask you about your disability and the impact this has on studying. You may be invited to try some software or equipment. The Assessor will write a detailed report which recommends equipment, software and adjustments. This will be shared with the funding body and your university.

Do I need evidence to apply for DSA?

Yes, you will need official evidence that you meet the Equality Act 2010 definition of disability in order to apply for DSA. The table below shows which evidence you require:

Disability	Evidence required
Disability or long-term health condition	A copy of a report or letter from your doctor or consultant
Mental health condition	A copy of a report or letter from your doctor or consultant
Specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia	A copy of a 'diagnostic assessment' from a practitioner psychologist or suitably qualified specialist teacher

Each funding body also has its own Disability Evidence Form which you can ask a medical professional to complete (although the form cannot be used for Specific Learning Differences such as dyslexia). You can download copies of the evidence forms using the links provided in the Funding Body table, above. It might be worth asking your school SENCo if they hold any evidence that they can release to assist your application.

When should I apply for DSA?

Completing the DSA process can take up to 15 weeks at busy times, so it is important that you apply early to make sure your support is in place when you

start university. You can usually apply for DSA from the March in the year that you are due to commence your studies. For example, if you are due to start university in September 2022, you can apply for DSA from March 2022. You do not need to wait until you have received your exam results or have accepted your place at university. DSA is a national process and will transfer between universities. In most cases you only need to apply for DSA once.

Who can I contact for help with the process?

You can contact Disability Services at any of the universities you have applied to for information about, and support with the process of applying for DSA. You can also find further information and links to additional resources at the end of this guidance document.

Checklist for accessing support and adjustments

- Research your chosen universities to find out about their disability support
- Share information about your disability at the point of application (e.g. on your UCAS form)
- Write down a list of the support you currently receive at school, so you don't forget anything when arranging your support.
- Find copies of any diagnostic evidence, arrange to gather this evidence, or arrange a diagnostic assessment as required
- Register with the Disability Service at each university you apply to
- Discuss any disability-related accommodation requirements with your chosen universities
- Complete a Disabled Students' Allowances application (from March)
- Attend a DSA Study Needs Assessment if your funding body tells you to
- Once you have received your entitlement letter, contact the suppliers of any recommended equipment or support.
- Consider participating in any transition events or activities your university organises for disabled students
- If you're not sure what to do at any stage of the process, contact Disability Services at any of your chosen universities

Table: key terminology, what it means and how it differs

School term	University term	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) • Special Needs • Special Educational Needs (SEN) • Additional Needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability 	<p>Universities do not use the term ‘Special Educational Needs’ as this is specific to schools and colleges. Instead, universities use the word ‘disability’. This may feel unfamiliar, but the term ‘disability’ is broad and considers any physical, mental or sensory impairment which has a significant impact on daily life, and which is long term (i.e. lasts more than 12 months). For a student, daily activities might include taking notes, writing, researching, reading large amounts of text and moving between multiple locations.</p> <p>This includes people who</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are D/deaf or hearing impaired • are blind or visually impaired • are physically disabled, and/or have mobility difficulties • have a specific learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia) • have a neurodevelopmental condition (e.g. AD(H)D) • have a neurological condition (e.g. epilepsy, Tourette Syndrome, stammer) • are autistic • have a mental health condition • have a long-term medical condition (e.g. chronic fatigue syndrome, asthma, diabetes, cancer, HIV) • have a combination of these

		<p>If any of these apply to you, you are likely to be eligible for support and adjustments to your learning, teaching and assessment.</p> <p>Although it might feel difficult or unfamiliar to use the term 'disability' or 'disabled' for the first time, remember that disability is about the barriers created by society, not about your worth, ability or intellect. Identifying as disabled gives you protection under the Equality Act 2010 and enables you to access support and adjustments.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEND Department • Additional Learning Support (ALS) • Learning Support Team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability Services • Disability Team • Student Support • Student Services • Wellbeing/Welfare Services • AccessAbility or Accessibility Team 	<p>The name given to the service or team that supports disabled students varies depending on the university, but most will contain the word 'disability', 'wellbeing' or 'support' in their title. Use a search engine to search for the name of the university plus the word 'disability' or contact Student Services at the university to ask for details.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Educational Needs (& Disabilities) Coordinator (SENCo or SENDCo) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability Advisor/Adviser • Disability Coordinator • Disability Officer 	<p>The equivalent of a SENDCo at university is usually someone who works in Disability Services or Student Support Services. Their title can vary, but will usually contain the word 'disability', 'wellbeing' or 'inclusion', and 'advisor' or 'adviser', 'coordinator' or 'officer'.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning Support Coordinator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wellbeing Advisor/Adviser • Inclusion Advisor/Adviser • Access Officer/Advisor 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability 	See the section on Special Educational Needs & Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional Needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability 	See the section on Special Educational Needs & Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP) • Statement of Needs • Pupil Passport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs Assessment Report • Reasonable Adjustments Plan • Support Summary Sheet • Individual Learning Plan 	The equivalent of an EHCP or Statement at university is called different things at different universities. Most universities will have some method of sharing information about support and adjustments with other colleagues, often with the word 'support', 'reasonable adjustments' or 'plan' in the title. If you apply for Disabled Students Allowances (DSA) you will have a Needs Assessment Report as part of the application process.

Additional resources

You can find further information about disability support at university at the following links:

Student Finance England DSA QuickStart Guide:

<https://media.slc.co.uk/sfe/quickstartfinanceguide/dsa.html>

Student Finance England 'What is DSA?' video guide:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6wBf_7ZSXU&t=1s

UCAS guide to disability support and finance:

<https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/individual-needs/disabled-students>

Disability Rights UK student factsheets:

<https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/how-we-can-help/benefits-information/factsheets/education-factsheets>

Save the Student DSA information and advice:

<https://www.savethestudent.org/student-finance/disabled-students-allowances-dsa.html>

Student Finance England: <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa>

Student Awards Agency Scotland: <https://www.saas.gov.uk/forms/dsa>

Student Finance Wales: <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/>

Student Finance Northern Ireland: <https://www.studentfinancenir.co.uk/>

A note on the authors

This guidance has been written by Harriet Cannon, Disability Advisory Team Manager at the University of Leeds, with valued input from members of the National Association of Disability Practitioners: <https://nadp-uk.org/>.